

**DATE: March 13, 2002**

**LOCATION: Homecroft Recreation Center, 1845 Sheridan Avenue**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Jill Danner, William Dunnigan, Terry Huntrods, Ken Mauer, John O'Halloran, Al Paulson

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** Heidi Welsch (excused)

**STAFF PRESENT:** Vic Wittgenstein, Mike Hahm, John Wirka, Judy Miller, Mike Rossberg

**VISITORS:** David Sting, Anthony Casey, Rich Aguilar, Jane McClure, Patrick Smith, Michael Wong, Gloria Roston White, Shawn Bartsch, Howard Roston, Mary Waldrop

**1. AGENDA, MINUTES, INTRODUCTIONS, ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Chair Paulson called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m.

Commissioner O'Halloran asked that the item "Groveland Gym Floor" be added to the agenda. It was agreed this item should be placed under "Advocacy Issues."

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as written.

**2. DIRECTOR'S REPORT**

Mr. Wittgenstein noted the annual Division Conference will be held tomorrow, March 14, from 8:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and will focus on the topic of safety. Commissioners are invited to attend. Commissioner Paulson indicated his intention to attend.

The Division has submitted its 2002 budget recommendations to the Mayor. It includes \$635,000 in possible adjustments, including both reductions and new revenue sources.

The Division is awaiting a response from the Mayor. It faces three problems with the 2003 budget: 1) a revenue shortage at the State, which could affect local aid; 2) the fact the City used up its \$10 million surplus to help balance the 2002 budget, and 3) inflation. There are likely to be greater reductions in next year's budget.

The Parks and Recreation Commissioner position has been posted. As stated in a correspondence from Mayoral Assistant Kurt Schultz, the Mayor's office will observe all relevant ordinances in conducting the selection process and expects to announce the new appointments in early to mid April.

Today (March 13) is the last day to apply for the Director's position. 75-80 applications have been received, 15-20 of which are completed. A committee will screen these applications and reduce them to about 10, then a second committee will select three finalists, who will be interviewed by the Mayor. The Mayor's goal is to announce his selection by May 1.

Chair Paulson adjourned the regular meeting at 7:02 p.m.

### **3. NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY ISSUES**

#### **Public Hearing: Application to the DNR Outdoor Recreation Program for Site Work at Homecroft Recreation Center.**

Commissioner Paulson called the public hearing to order at 7:03 p.m. and asked that speakers make their presentation according to their place on the sign up sheet.

##### Anthony Casey

Mr. Casey introduced himself as a fifth grade student at Homecroft School. He said the recreation center needs a new playground because many pieces of equipment are broken. The wooden play equipment chips when wet and gives off splinters. There is currently a bee hive in a hole in one of the pieces of equipment. The tot lot area gets flooded and was put in when his mother was a student at Homecroft School.

##### Gloria Rosson White

Ms. Rosson White introduced herself as a kindergarten teacher at Homecroft School. She has had a couple of serious accidents with her class when students were using the play area. The tot lot is no longer safe, and a couple of pieces of equipment were removed for that reason. Her classes still use the area because they have no alternative, but with the reduced equipment the area is crowded.

Shawn Bartsch

Ms. Bartsch introduced herself as a member of the Highland District Planning Council and the mother of a child who plays at the Homecroft tot lot. The playground is in bad shape. This is unfortunate, since it serves the captive neighborhood in the Sibley Manor Apartments. This is a low rent facility, many of whose tenants are new immigrants, have limited mobility and find it difficult to travel to the next nearest recreation center.

Judy Miller

Ms. Miller introduced herself as the Director at Homecroft Recreation Center. She confirmed the facilities need improvements and read a letter from neighborhood resident Mary Lynch. In her letter, Ms. Lynch stated, "The playground equipment, including the jungle gym, is made of wood, very old wood. It has given my children slivers. Last summer, I was in the building when one of the children broke through the slats... I respectfully request this entire playground be refurbished with new equipment. This would greatly diminish the risk to all the children who play at Homecroft." She also distributed an article in the May 27, 2001, Highland Villager which noted the Highland District Planning Council had rated the site work and play area renovation at Homecroft its highest capital improvement priority.

Commissioner Paulson called the public hearing to a close at 7:24 p.m.

**Public Hearing: Application to the DNR Outdoor Recreation Program for Site Work at North Dale Recreation Center.**

Commissioner Paulson called the next public hearing to order at 7:25 p.m. and asked if any of the visitors present wished to speak to the topic, "Application to the DNR Outdoor Recreation Program for Site Work at North Dale Recreation Center." None of the visitors wished to speak.

Commissioner Paulson called the public hearing to a close at 7:26 p.m.

Commissioner Paulson called the regular meeting back to order at 7:27 p.m.

Commissioner Paulson reported that Mr. Hahm wished to offer a few words of explanation about the topic of the next public hearing, the proposed Town Square Park/Plaza Café Lease Agreement. Mr. Hahm stated that Town Square Park, a city owned facility on the third floor of the North Central Life Tower, was opened in the early 1980s. It was successful for over a decade, but when a city assessment which helped subsidize it was coupled with changing usage patterns, Town Square began to lose more money than it raised. During its last year of operations it incurred \$400,000 in expenses while raising considerably less revenues, while last year after being closed it incurred \$150,000 in operating costs while taking in no revenues. As a result, the Division has

adopted the goal of selling or leasing the property to a party who would assume the operating costs. Michael Wong, former owner and operator of the Plaza Café, stepped forward and was deemed an appropriate lessee by the Division and Bill Moran of the Port Authority Real Estate Office. The Division entered into negotiations with Mr. Wong and came to terms reflected in the proposed lease agreement, which will be considered by the City Council on March 20.

Commissioner Paulson adjourned the regular meeting at 7:39 p.m.

### **Public Hearing: Proposed Lease Agreement for Town Square Park with the Plaza Café**

Commissioner Paulson called the next public hearing to order at 7:39 p.m. and asked that speakers make their presentations in the order their names appeared on the sign-up sheet.

#### Howard Roston

Mr. Roston introduced himself as a representative of Sentinel Property Management, the firm which manages the North Central Life Tower and a total of 2,000,000 square feet of property in Saint Paul. He recommended that the Commission not approve the resolution endorsing the Town Square Park lease agreement. His firm supports the Division's attempt to lease this space to a suitable third party, but opposes the agreement with this particular possible lessee, Mr. Wong. His firm had difficulties in the past with Mr. Wong when he operated Plaza Café in Riverplace. Mr. Wong's management of the café, Mr. Roston stated, was a disaster in that he was disrespectful to other tenants, failed to pay the rent in a timely manner and left behind a mess when he vacated the premises which required an \$18,000 clean-up, for which Mr. Roston's firm is holding Mr. Wong responsible. This will be, Mr. Roston said, an ineffective short term fix for the Division which will produce a failure in the long run. He produced photos for the Commission's inspection which he said demonstrated the untidy state in which Mr. Wong left the Plaza Café space when he vacated it.

#### Mary Waldrop

Ms. Waldrop introduced herself as the Accounting Vice President of Sentinel Property Management. As someone who has a fiduciary responsibility to her firm's clients, she urged the Commission to take a second look at the proposed lease agreement. Her firm does not object to the use of Town Square Park for a banquet facility or restaurant, but does oppose Mr. Wong as a potential lessee.

#### Patrick Smith

Mr. Smith introduced himself as the attorney for Mr. Wong, retained by him to help find a space for his banquet business. Mayor Kelly, Deputy Mayor Flaherty, Bill Moran from the Port Authority and the Division of Parks and Recreation have all been positive about the prospect of him locating his business at Town Square Park. Mr. Wong has a

good business model and intends to run an excellent facility which includes making capital improvements to the site.

Michael Wong

Mr. Wong reported the owners of Riverplace established a food court there which he was hired to operate. This proved unsuccessful after Mississippi Live vacated the premises. He then tried a catering business which was moderately successful, leading to the establishment of the Plaza Café. The new owners at Riverplace, Sentinel Property Management, wanted him out about a year ago but he struck a deal with them to finish out his scheduled events. He vacated the premises in early January after a large event involving teenagers. He will try to be a good tenant at Town Square Park, starting out his business hosting weddings and considering eventually opening a restaurant.

Rick Aguilar

Mr. Aguilar introduced himself as a Saint Paul business owner who is active in efforts to promote minority owned businesses. He is a big downtown booster who likes the idea of Mr. Wong opening a facility at Town Square Park because it will bring many members of the Asian community downtown. This venture will allow a beautiful venue to be reopened and will provide the chance for an Asian entrepreneur to operate downtown. He is sure Mr. Wong's business will be successful.

Given the indication at this point that some of the speakers wished to add to their previous remarks, Commissioner Paulson granted previous speakers one minute to make additional comments.

Howard Roston

Mr. Roston noted that Sentinel Property Management has been operating in Saint Paul since 1996. He is from Saint Paul and Ms. Waldrop has been in Saint Paul for 10 years.

Michael Wong

Mr. Wong stated he has been in business for 20 years and never has had a problem with owners. He did try to clean up the Plaza Café site before vacating and was surprised and troubled by the large clean-up bill he subsequently received from Sentinel.

Mary Waldrop

Ms. Waldrop noted Mr. Wong had received citations and default notices from the previous owners.

Commissioner Paulson called the public hearing to a close at 8:23 p.m.

#### **4. ADVOCACY ISSUES**

Commissioner Paulson called the regular meeting back to order at 8:24 p.m.

Discussion: Resolution #02-8

Commissioner Danner noted the importance of having a good long term track record in Saint Paul in matters such as a proposal to operate a new business.

Mr. Hahm observed that the Division, which owns the property at Town Square Park, recommends approval of the lease agreement. While Bill Moran recognized the past conflicts between Sentinel and Mr. Wong, he discounted some of the concerns and placed conditions in the lease agreement to shield the City from harm were any of the other concerns to recur. The photographs Sentinel produced do not lie, but neither do they provide any context, and thus they are of limited value. The City has taken all the information given by both sides into account when drawing up this lease agreement and has placed terms in it which safeguard the City from problems. For example, were Mr. Wong to be late on a rent payment, he would be in default after only five days, not the standard 30. Mr. Wong has been asked to pay rent during the first six months, and if the arrangement works out well, he will be forgiven his rent for the following six months in recognition of the fact he is making capital improvements. The Division is approaching this arrangement as a business transaction and believes it will be to its benefit.

Vote: Resolution #02-4

Commissioner Huntrods made a motion to adopt Resolution #02-4 which stands resolved, “that the Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Commission endorses the grant application of the Division of Parks and Recreation to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Outdoor Recreation Grant Program for funding for site development work at Homecroft Recreation Center.” Commissioner Danner seconded the motion. Mr. Rossberg subsequently represented that he had received an e-mail from Commissioner Welsch supporting the resolution. The resolution was adopted by a 7-0 vote.

Vote: Resolution #02-5

Commissioner Danner made a motion to adopt Resolution #02-5 which stands resolved, “that the Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Commission endorses the grant application of the Division of Parks and Recreation to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Outdoor Recreation Grant Program for funding for site development work at North Dale Recreation Center.” Commissioner Huntrods seconded the motion. Mr. Rossberg subsequently represented that he had received an e-mail from Commissioner Welsch supporting the resolution. The resolution was adopted by a 7-0 vote.

Vote: Resolution #02-8

Commissioner Dunnigan made a motion to adopt Resolution #02-8 which resolves, “that the Parks and Recreation Commission endorses the proposed lease agreement between the Division of Parks and Recreation and Plaza Café for the use of Town Square Park by

Plaza Café for a period of five years.” Commissioner Huntrods seconded the motion. Mr. Rossberg represented that he had received an e-mail from Commissioner Welsch supporting the resolution. The resolution was adopted by a 7-0 vote.

#### Groveland Recreation Center Floor

Groveland Recreation Center is a joint use facility with Groveland School. Commissioner O’Halloran reported that people would like the present tile floor there replaced by a wooden one. Mr. Wirka noted the School District is responsible for the upkeep of the indoor facilities at Groveland, although the recreation center uses the gym a lot. Actually, the Division prefers wooden floors because they are now comparably priced with tile floors and do less long term harm to children’s knees and ankles. At Groveland, however, the situation is limited to a few tiles that have come loose and could be repaired, and neither the District nor the Division have funds to replace the entire floor, which would cost around \$30,000. If the District wished to replace the present floor with a tile one, the Division would consider paying whatever difference there might be in cost between a tile and a wooden floor to ensure that a wooden one is installed.

#### Design and Construction Section Report

Mr. Wirka reported the Design and Construction Section is responsible for the Division’s part in the Capital Improvement Budget (CIB) process, about which he had provided specifics at the February meeting. The Division also handles assorted state and federal grant awards and private contributions. The entire section is self supporting and consists of eight landscape architects, two landscape architect trainees, and accountant and two other positions currently vacant in addition to himself. The section is divided into “Team A” led by Tim Agness and “Team Z” led by Don Ganje. In addition to the CIB process, it deals with 22 different consultant contracts, 25 grants awards and other agencies including City departments, the Design Center, Public Arts St. Paul and Ramsey County. It receives about half of its operating funds from the CIB process, a goodly amount from the State and lesser amounts from the federal government, the Metropolitan Council and Ramsey County. Key recent projects have included Harriet Island, Target Stage, Battle Creek and other recreation centers, and Rice Park. The most significant project now underway is the Education Resource Program in Como Park. In reply to a question from the Commission. Mr. Wirka said the section approaches major projects in stages, each of which is fully funded within itself and will result in a completed, free-standing facility which will become a part of a larger project when the necessary additional funds are secured.

#### Special Services Section Report

Mr. Hahm reported the Special Services Section has many specialized functions and may be thought of as the “enterprise branch” of the Division. It has 414 employees, most of whom are seasonal, temporary, and receive less than \$10/hour. There are only 14 supervisors among the 414 employees, making for a very high employee to supervisor ratio. The section has one operating goal: to measure everything that can be measured so

it can be effectively evaluated. The section has invested in technology to aid in this process. In golf and aquatics, for example, there has been a push to get registration on-line. Other activities include Music in the Parks, specialized buildings such as the

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Rice/Arlington Dome and contract management at facilities including Como Lakeside Pavilion, Watergate Marina and Town Square Park. Golf takes in 62% of the section's revenues and accounts for 57% of its spending, which indicates that golf revenues are used to support other section activities. A recent hike in weekend golf rates brings Saint Paul more in line with the pricing policies of other cities.

## **5. COMMISSION STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES**

The NRPA and MRPA awards discussion was tabled.

Mr. Rossberg referred to the draft letter written in Chair Paulson's name that informs District Planning Council Community Organizers about the May Commission hearings. Commissioners approved the letter by consensus.

## **6. TASK FORCE AND SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS**

Mr. Rossberg suggested the next Long Range Planning Subcommittee meeting be postponed until after the new Director is selected, possibly until May or June. This was agreed to by the Commission.

Commissioner Huntrods noted the very generous donations that had been made for the Education Resource Center to the Como Zoo and Conservatory Society.

## **7. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting adjourned at 9:36 p.m.

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